

Message Text

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FM AMEMBASSY BUENOS AIRES

TO SECSTATE WASHDC 7118

C O N F I D E N T I A L BUENOS AIRES 6041

E.O. 11652: GDS

TAGS: PINT, PFOR, SHUM, CASC, AR

SUBJECT: JEHOVAH WITNESSES

REF: (A) STATE 224228, (B) BUENOS AIRES 5950

1. POLCOUNS RAISED JEHOVAH WITNESS PROBLEM SEPT 15 WITH DIRECTOR OF WORSHIP AT FOREIGN MINISTRY. COUNSELOR EMPHASIZED THAT US HAD NO WISH TO INTERFERE IN ARGENTINA'S INTERNAL AFFAIRS. WHETHER DECREE 1867 (SEE REF B) IS IN COMPLIANCE WITH ARGENTINE CONSTITUTION IS MATTER FOR ARGENTINE COURTS TO DECIDE. HOWEVER, COUNSELOR NOTED, THERE IS CONSIDERABLE CONCERN IN US AS TO DECREE'S IMPLICATIONS, ESPECIALLY IN TERMS OF FREEDOM OF RELIGIOUS EXPRESSION, AND EMBASSY FELT GOA SHOULD BE AWARE OF THIS CONCERN.

2. DIRECTOR OF WORSHIP REPLIED THAT QUESTION WAS UNPLEASANT ONE. HE PERSONALLY ADMIRERD WITNESSES AS HARD-WORKING, MORALLY UPRIGHT GROUP WHICH IN MANY WAYS OTHER ARGENTINES WOULD DO WELL TO EMULATE. FURTHER, HE INSISTED, GOA'S ACTION DID NOT REFLECT RELIGIOUS PREJUDICE ON ITS PART. ON CONTRARY, MANY RELIGIONS ARE PRACTICED IN ARGENTINA. UNFORTUNATELY, HOWEVER, THERE ARE CERTAIN PRACTICES OF THE JEHOVAH WITNESSES WHICH ARE CIVIC/ POLITICAL IN NATURE. REFUSING TO SALUTE FLAGE IS ONE OF THEM. REFUSING TO SERVE IN ARMED FORCES IS ANOTHER. LATTER, HE POINTED OUT, IS DIRECT CONTRAVENTION OF ARTICLE 21 OF THE CONSTITUTION. INDEED, HE NOTED, ARTICLE 21 DEMANDED NOT JUST THAT CITIZENS "SERVE" IN ARMED

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FORCES, BUT THAT THEY "BEAR ARMS IN DEFENSE OF COUNTRY."

3. DIRECTOR WENT ON TO SAY THAT DESPITE OBJECTIONABLE FEATURES ABOVE AND DESPITE FACT THAT MEASURES CANCELLING WITNESSES REGISTRATION HAD BEEN ON BOOKS SINCE 1950, ACTION AGAINST THEM AT THIS POINT MIGHT NOT HAVE BEEN NECESSARY HAD THEIR ACTIVITIES BEEN RESTRICTED TO BUENOS AIRES OR TO "STRATEGICALLY SAFE" AREAS OF COUNTRY. SUCH PRACTICES IN PROVINCES OF CORRIENTES AND MISIONES, WHICH ARE VIRTUALLY SURROUNDED BY BRAZIL, HOWEVER, ARE QUITE ANOTHER THING. IN THESE STRATEGIC BORDER PROVINCES, THE GOA COULD NOT AFFORD TO TOLERATE THE EXAMPLE OF PEOPLE WHO WOULD NOT SWER ALLEGIANCE TO OR DEFEND THE ARGENTINE FLAG. GOVERNORS OF THOSE PROVINCES HAD DEMANDED ACTION AND CENTRAL AUTHORITIES HAD LITTLE CHOICE BUT TO COMPLY.

4. DIRECTOR CONCLUDED BY SAYING HE HAD NO DOUBT GOA'S ACTION WAS PERFECTLY LEGAL, AND GIVEN GEOPOLITICAL CONSIDERATIONS ABOVE, PRAGMATICALLY SOUND. WITNESSES HAD FULL RECOURSE TO COURTS AND COULD APPEAL DECREE TO SUPREME COURT IF THEY WISHED. HE ADDED THAT GOA INTENDED TO IMPLEMENT DECREE WITH AS MUCH FLEXIBILITY AND COMPASSION AS POSSIBLE AND IN SO DOING WOULD TAKE INTO CONSIDERATION CONCERN IN US MENTIONED BY COUNSELOR.
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